

Search:

Web Search

Brought to you by Yahoo! Health

[Home](#) [U.S.](#) [Business](#) [World](#) [Entertainment](#) [Sports](#) [Tech](#) [Politics](#) [Elections](#) [Science](#) [Health](#) [Most Popular](#)
[Health Video](#) [Weight Loss](#) [Sexual Health](#) [Medications/Drugs](#) [Parenting/Kids](#) [Seniors/Aging](#) [Diseases/Conditions](#)
Search:

All News

Search

[Advanced](#)

It's no LOL: Few US doctors answer e-mails from patients

 Associated Press

By ALICIA CHANG, AP Science Writer

Tue Apr 22, 9:28 PM ET

LOS ANGELES - Suzanne Kreuziger is a registered nurse who uses e-mail almost exclusively to communicate with friends. But when it comes to reaching her doctor, there's a frustrating firewall.

The barrier is her doctor's own reluctance to talk to patients through e-mail.

"It makes sense to me to have the words laid out, to be able to re-read, to go back to it at a convenient time," the 34-year-old Milwaukee woman recently wrote on a social networking site. "If I were able to ask my physician questions this way, it would make my own health care much easier."

Kreuziger's experience is shared by most Americans: They want the convenience of e-mail for non-urgent medical issues, but fewer than a third of U.S. doctors use e-mail to communicate with patients, according to recent physician surveys.

"People are able to file their taxes online, buy and sell household goods, and manage their financial accounts," said Susannah Fox of the Pew Internet & American Life Project. "The health care industry seems to be lagging behind other industries."

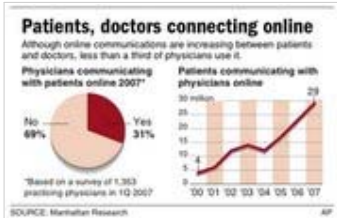
Doctors have their reasons for not hitting the reply button more often. Some worry it will increase their workload, and most physicians don't get reimbursed for it by insurance companies. Others fear hackers could compromise patient privacy — even though doctors who do e-mail generally do it through password-protected Web sites.

There are also concerns that patients will send urgent messages that don't get answered promptly. And any snafu raises the specter of legal liability.

Many patients would like to use e-mail for routine matters such as asking for a prescription refill, getting lab results or scheduling a visit. Doing so, they say, would help avoid phone tag or taking time off work to come in for a minor problem.

Still, a survey conducted early last year by Manhattan Research found that only 31 percent of doctors e-mailed their patients in the first quarter of 2007.

Two major health insurers, Cigna Corp. and Aetna Inc., this year expanded pilot programs that compensate doctors who use a secure Internet site to make virtual house calls with patients. That includes the ability to send encrypted e-mail, a move some hope will increase the number of doctors who go digital.



AP Photo: Graphic shows the number of patients and doctors communicating using online services; 1c x 4...

HEALTH VIDEO



Calorie count controversy
CNN



The Dangers of Lasik
ABC News

» All news video

YAHOO! NEWS TOPIC PAGES

NEW! Get in-depth coverage on [exercise and fitness](#) and [health care](#) with new topic pages.



EARTH DAY: CLIMATE CHANGE

From the '60 Minutes' archives



Megafires and global warming
Forests changing in Western U.S.



Garden of Eden
Exploring an

ADVERTISEMENT



untouched wilderness.



Melting North Pole?

The extent of the warming problem.



Warmer Antarctica

The dire prediction for coastal lands.



Too many grizzlies

The dilemma at Yellowstone.

ELSEWHERE ON THE WEB

ABC News: [Would You Eat Test-Tube Meat?](#)

ABC News: [Blurry Outlook? Risks of LASIK Surgery](#)

Time.com: [When What the Patient Wants Isn't Best](#)

YAHOO! GREEN



Free is good

How to give and get perfectly good stuff for free, reducing waste.

FROM Y! HEALTH



Health Questions?

Find answers on Yahoo! Health:

Search

» [More from Y! Health](#)



Dr. Daniel Z. Sands, an assistant clinical professor at [Harvard Medical School](#), is among the early adopters who doesn't get paid for e-visits. He sees communicating with patients online as no different from phoning them, a practice that also is not billable.

Since 2000, Sands has answered patient questions by logging onto a password-protected Web site of the Harvard-affiliated [Beth Israel Deaconess Medical Center](#). He also sets his Treo to retrieve new messages every four hours. He mostly gets e-mails from patients seeking advice for new symptoms or updates from chronic disease sufferers.

Although Sands has had mostly positive experiences, one patient bombarded him with e-mails. She became "pushy" and her messages were sometimes threatening.

"We sort of had this fight back and forth through electronic communication, which is absolutely the wrong thing to do. I should have picked up the phone and called her. Any message that takes more than two volleys back and forth should not be done by e-mail," Sands said.

The [American Medical Association](#) says e-mail should not replace face-to-face time with patients. The group's etiquette guidelines recommend talking to patients about the technology's limitations.

Most studies have shown patients don't abuse e-mail. They generally don't deluge doctors with rambling messages, and Internet exchanges may even help doctors' productivity and cut down on office visits.

For example, a 2007 [University of Pittsburgh](#) study published in the journal *Pediatrics* followed 121 families who e-mailed their doctors. Researchers found 40 percent of e-mails were sent after business hours and only about 6 percent were urgent. Doctors received on average about one e-mail a day and responded 57 percent faster than by telephone.

A separate study by health care giant Kaiser Permanente published in the *American Journal of Managed Care* last year found patients who used its secure Web system were 7 to 10 percent less likely to schedule an office visit. Patients also made 14 percent fewer phone calls than those who did not use the online services.

Before e-mail can become as routine as a physical, doctors need to be trained to handle confidential patient messages in the digital age, some experts say. That would include learning to file e-mails in patients' health records and instructing patients in the risks of electronic messaging.

Kreuziger, the nurse who can't e-mail her doctor, works in a large practice that also doesn't offer e-mail services. She often has to phone patients to check on their blood-sugar levels or track them down about an abnormal lab test — a chore for a person who prefers e-mail over the phone.

"I hate a ringing phone. It's an interruption," she said in an interview.

Kreuziger and her colleagues recently asked patients about their Internet needs. Of the 76 patients who responded to the questionnaire, most said they would like e-mail access to their doctors.

It's not the first time the medical field has been slow to embrace technology. When the first telephones became widely available in the late 1800s, doctors were concerned about being swamped with calls.

Dr. Tom Delbanco, a primary care doctor at [Beth Israel](#) who e-mails patients, believes it is just a matter of time before the technology becomes a routine part of patient care.

"Medicine is very conservative. It changes slowly," he said.



ADVERTISEMENT



Add headlines to your
personalized My Yahoo! page
(About My Yahoo! and RSS)

Health - AP

» More news feeds

NEWS ALERTS

Get an alert when there
are new stories about:

- ☐ Cigna Corp
- ☐ University of Pittsburgh
study
- ☐ American Medical
Association
- ☐ Beth Israel Deaconess
Medical Center
- ☐ Harvard Medical School

Add Selected Alerts

» More alerts

On the Net:

American Medical Association: <http://www.ama-assn.org>

E-Patient Blog: <http://e-patients.net>

Email Story

IM Story

Printable View

Yahoo! Buzz

RECOMMEND THIS STORY

Recommend It:

Average (63 votes)



» Recommended Stories

Full Coverage: Health Care

NEWS STORIES

Fewer general surgeons in U.S. -
researchers Reuters via Yahoo! News, Apr 21

Watchdog critical of FDA foreign drug
oversight Reuters via Yahoo! News, Apr 21

Ghostwriters for medical research criticized,
reforms urged AP via Yahoo! News, Apr 15

Study: Boomers to flood medical system AP
via Yahoo! News, Apr 14

FEATURE ARTICLES

Supreme Court case: Do health plans have
conflicts of interest? The Christian Science
Monitor via Yahoo! News, Apr 23

It's no LOL: Few US doctors answer e-mails
from patients AP via Yahoo! News, Apr 23

OPINION & EDITORIALS

Our view on health care: Beware drug
co-pays, no-pays USATODAY.com via Yahoo!
News, Apr 21

Must you buy health insurance? at Christian
Science Monitor, Mar 26

Health News

Risk of depression dims hopes for
anti-addiction pills AP

Mom's diet may play role in whether baby is
boy or girl AP

UN official: Biodiversity loss could hurts
medical research AP

World Food Program warns of 'silent tsunami'
of hunger AP

Whirlpool suspends 39 workers, says they
lied about smoking AP

Most Viewed - Health

Mother's diet can help determine sex of child:
study AFP

Mom's diet may play role in whether baby is
boy or girl AP

Biodiversity loss will lead to sick world:
experts AFP

Women's life expectancy drops in some US
counties AP

Risk of depression dims hopes for
anti-addiction pills AP

Health Video

Calorie count controversy CNN - Wed Apr 23,
5:21 AM ET

The Dangers of Lasik ABC News - Wed Apr 23,
10:01 AM ET

Tainted drug blamed in deaths CNN - Wed Apr
23, 8:46 AM ET

Surgery For Girl With 16 lb. Tumor FOX News -
Wed Apr 23, 12:05 PM ET

Search:

All News

Search

Advanced

Yahoo! - My Yahoo! - Mail

[Home](#) | [U.S](#) | [Business](#) | [World](#) | [Entertainment](#) | [Sports](#) | [Tech](#) | [Politics](#) | [Science](#) | [Health](#) | [Travel](#) | [Most Popular](#) | [Odd News](#) | [Opinion](#)

Copyright © 2008 The Associated Press. All rights reserved. The information contained in the AP News report may not be published, broadcast, rewritten or redistributed without the prior written authority of The Associated Press.

Copyright © 2008 Yahoo! Inc. All rights reserved.
[Questions or Comments](#)

[Privacy Policy](#) - [Terms of Service](#) - [Copyright/IP Policy](#) - [Ad Feedback](#)